The Justice, Inequalities and Gender Based Violence (GBV) Project:

A description of the methodological and analytic approach to phase 3 qualitative interviews with victim-survivors (v-s).

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Introduction

This working paper focuses on the interview phase (Phase 3) of a larger ESRC funded research project concerned with Justice, Inequalities, and Gender Based Violence[i], and includes a detailed description of our recruitment strategies, the demographic profile of participants, and the analytic framework employed to make sense of this large volume of in-depth, multi-layered interview data. The paper shows how the sample was recruited to reflect intersectional aspects, the process of designing the interview questions to reflect 'Gender Based Violence [GBV] and justice' and the ecological model framing the analysis. It briefly outlines the GBV experiences of participants, situating these in relation to the intersecting demographic characteristics of participants. This paper by outlining the methodological approach in phase 3 of this research provides a more detailed description of those methods than is possible in some of the papers published from this work, and which are referenced here.

Aims and Objectives

The aim of the project overall, and within this phase of the research specifically, was to ascertain:

1. How do victim-survivor (v-s)and others (practitioners) experience and perceive 'justice'?
2. How does inequality affect access to support pathways and trajectories through the formal and informal justice systems?
3. How are notions of empowerment linked to perceptions of justice and access to justice?
4. What would a truly victim focused justice agenda for GBV look like?

The project sought and gained research ethics approval from the University of Bristol, Faculty of Social Science and Law Research Ethics Committee. It is also worth noting, although expanded in a separate paper (Williamson et al, 2020), that specific measures were put in place to support the team of researchers during the interview and analysis phases of the research. This was in recognition of the potential for secondary trauma from conducting

research with people who have experienced traumatic life events. All of the consent, information, and protocol information is available from the UK Data Service:

https://reshare.ukdataservice.ac.uk/853338/

Recruitment

We were aware when submitting our initial funding proposal that we needed to ensure that the project addressed each of the three topics under investigation (Justice, Inequalities, and Gender Based Violence), and that our recruitment strategy needed to be designed accordingly. To this end we planned our recruitment so that we collected information from a large number of participants with experience of different combinations of 1) forms of GBV, 2) types of possible justice responses, and, 3) categories of inequality. We aimed to cover all permutations, recognising that many participants would fall within multiple categories related to GBV experience, type of justice, and forms of inequality. We correctly anticipated that with purposive sampling, and the assistance provided by relevant organisations, a total of 240 participants would be adequate to meet this aim.

The recruitment process consisted of asking partner agencies, described below, to send information about the project to their service users. Information was distributed through on-line forums, email, posters, and flyers handed to potential participants by key workers. The information given outlined the project and provided links through to an on-line form, telephone, or email so people could request more information or register their interest. In total, 321 people contacted us about the research, of these 140 of the participants completed the on-line form which we had designed to collect basic information, including safe contact details, and whether someone wanted to participate in a face-to-face, telephone, or other type of interview. Other participants contacted us via direct email or via practitioners with whom they were in contact. Of the 321 individuals who expressed an interest we were able to conduct interviews with most; the remaining 70 prospective participants either changed their minds about taking part once they were sent additional information, or did not respond to three emails trying to make contact, or could no longer be contacted via practitioners. For safety reasons we stopped contacting individuals after three attempts.

We also asked whether individuals required an interpreter or other support in order to take part. The range of interviews offered was intended to ensure that people with trauma or physical disabilities would not be prevented from participating. For example, we conducted an email exchange through a third party for a participant who wanted to remain completely anonymous to us. We also conducted email exchanges with a deaf participant who preferred that method of communication, and we interviewed one participant using an online forum of their choice, as they were experiencing debilitating anxiety.

Working with specialist agencies

We always knew that recruiting and interviewing at least 240 v-s across the different justice, inequality and GBV experiences might prove difficult. We therefore requested specific funding to assist organisations to help us to recruit potential participants. This was crucial given the impact of austerity measures on specialist services across the UK, many of whom have seen their services cut in recent years (Towers and Walby, 2012). A key aspect of recruitment was through the national organisations partnered to the project (Women's Aid England and Welsh Women's Aid), whose assistance was crucial for achieving our sample. For example, the issuing of one call for participants, through an on-line forum, resulted in over 100 potential participants contacting the team within 2 days. Given this success, we staggered the recruitment with other national organisations, asking them to send out information after all current participants had been allocated to an interviewer and contacted.

In total, we recruited participants through more than 80 different organisations. This included through personal contacts with specialist services, different community groups, and wider media and advertisements through the University press office. The size of the interviewing team (with ten experienced researchers) also helped in that each researcher had different areas of expertise and therefore different service and community contacts (e.g., a range of languages, links with BAME[ii] communities, traveller community groups, faith organisations, or people with learning disabilities).

Throughout the recruitment phase we kept a close watch on the coverage we had regarding GBV experiences and inequalities. This ensured we could adjust our recruitment purposively

to target those groups and communities where we had fewer responses. For example, during the later stages of the research, we targeted groups working with heterosexual male victims of abuse, LGBT community groups, and older women.

Developing the interview questions

As noted above this paper is concerned with phase 3 of a larger funded project, phase 1 of the project involved a systematic literature review (Mulvihill et al, 2018). This identified the (relatively small) body of literature that included or directly addressed the views and perceptions of v-s relating to help-seeking or justice-seeking. This was reviewed and summarised to produce a list of possible interview questions with questions covering the following themes: initial reporting and response, experience and perceptions of the criminal / civil/ family / other justice system processes; experiences and perceptions of the outcomes of systems experienced; and how the v-s perceived or positioned themselves in terms of their experience ('victim', 'survivor' or alternative terms, including none). As such, the questions used within the interviews arose initially from our review of the existing literature and the different levels of experience we sought to capture.

Secondly, we consulted with an existing survivors' group, through Women's Aid England, to pilot the interview questions. This group were primarily survivors of domestic violence but with other experiences of sexual and other types of GBV. All were women. This group recommended a wide range of inclusions in terms of the types of abuse we asked about, as well as offering advice about the ordering and wording of questions. A particularly good example is the recommendation from this group that we ask whether participants had felt coerced or forced into having sexual activity with a third party. Whilst the research team had reservations about having a question about this, based on fears about how respondents might react, the survivors were clear that its inclusion was necessary to reflect the many ways abuse may be perpetrated. As such, they helped us to word this particular question. This resulted in a sub-group of respondents where the strength and depth of their testimonies relating to this question has resulted in a separate paper (Matolcsi, 2020). Feedback from practitioners at various dissemination events has been that they generally do not ask about coerced sex with a third party due to its highly sensitive nature; however, our research reveals the value

of doing so, both for comprehensively reflecting the experiences of v-s and for informing future practice/interventions. Following this consultation with survivors, a second draft of questions was circulated to the research team for consideration.

The fact that different members of the research team had expertise working within different community groups (e.g. based on ethnicity, religion, sexuality etc.) meant that the interview questions were also scrutinised from different perspectives to ensure their relevance and comprehension across a diverse sample of participants. After this stage of revision was completed, we then circulated a final draft to the team to be piloted[iii].

The interviews included specific questions on demographics and GBV experience, and responses were added to an Excel spreadsheet after each interview was conducted, which allowed us to monitor the profile of participants and refine and target our sampling on an on-going basis. The spreadsheet also proved to be a useful tool in our analysis, as it facilitated quantitative analysis and produced findings to complement the qualitative data. We also used the responses to these questions as classifications in NVivo, in order to assist with the analysis of the qualitative data described below.

Qualitative interview data coding / analysis

Analysis for this paper was conducted on data from interviews with 251 v-s who self-identified as having experienced some form of GBV. The majority of participants were interviewed individually (n=227; 87%), with the remaining participants (n=24; 9%) taking part in group interviews[iv]. As discussed above, we collected responses to a series of closed questions that allowed us to produce some basic quantitative information about the sample. However, the quantitative data is not complete for all 251 interview participants because some taking part in group interviews did not provide this information, and others chose to recount their experiences in a way which precluded asking very specific questions. We received quantitative responses from a total of N=185 participants, which were analysed to provide a descriptive overview of the interview data.

Analysis of the interview data was carried out using a grounded approach. To develop themes, a single randomly selected interview transcript was initially coded line by line by ten team

members. The emerging themes were then discussed in pairs and additional reflections and issues arising from this process were then discussed amongst a core 'coding' team. After reading through the first 'test' transcript it was clear that the respondent was talking about different *types* and *levels* of barriers and routes to help-seeking and 'justice'. For example, most profoundly they were talking about an individual level barrier by the way of internalised blame or certain negative attitudes which prevented them from accessing help or justice. But there were also issues raised regarding family influences and institutional (health) level barriers and enablers elsewhere in the transcript. As such, we felt that an ecological framework provided the best fit for organising the data into a format that made sense of the different levels at which participants talked about experiencing abuse, justice, and inequalities.

Given the rich results of the test coding, we decided to continue to use a more grounded approach to coding. Specifically, we recorded what was negative as well as what was positive about each participant's experiences of help-seeking or justice-seeking; and what or who acted as barriers or enablers to help-seeking or justice-seeking. This provided a way for us to simultaneously code the transcripts in both substantive and theoretical ways (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

In order to manage this process and to ensure that the codes were emergent from the rich dataset we changed our approach slightly in the second round of coding testing to a more 'open' coding structure (using minimal headings of positive / negative experiences and barriers / enablers). For example, in order for data about help-seeking to make sense it was necessary to recognise that for the test transcript participant they had supressed their experiences of abuse as a teenager, and did not formally disclose until an adult. Their negative experiences of alcohol misuse services only made sense therefore within this context. Therefore, the structure of the framework we used allowed us to summarise the key issues impacting each participant meaning we could better engage with the data. We structured the themes in relation to the 'ecological model' (Heise, 1998) as an analytic framework, which was informed by intersectional factors (Hagemann-White, 2010). In the test transcript example, denial of the experience of early abuse was therefore identified as an individual level barrier. By using this ecological intersectional approach we could contribute to this body of work using the same theoretical framework to identify the different routes or

'pathways' to justice, and providing an opportunity to reveal alternative and non-formal routes to help-seeking and justice-seeking (see also Hagemann-White et al., 2010; Lilley-Walker and Hester, 2019). Given the breadth of the data that had been collected, we also wanted an analysis structure that would allow us to explore the connections between the different levels of data. To achieve this, we used a framework grid analysis process (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003).

Linking these two approaches (ecological and framework) allowed us to incorporate intersecting factors. For each interview, we created a summary where we noted the coded material for the ontogenetic, micro, meso, and macro level enablers and barriers to disclosure, reporting, and help-seeking. We also summarised the key issues in each case so that we could understand specific responses in the context of the specific experiences being recounted. These were added to the framework grid.

The summaries included key quotes from participants illustrating the key themes, as well as summaries from the researcher. These summaries (including the framework) were then imported into Nvivo along with classifications from the Excel sheet, relating to types of GBV, inequalities, and justice experienced, and these were then matched to the relevant summary files. This enabled us to analyse groups and sub-groups of participants according to different experiences of GBV, inequalities, and help-seeking and justice-seeking.

This approach of having the data presented in more than one way also facilitated more fine-grained analysis of this large corpus of qualitative interview material. It allowed different teams of researchers to use the summaries to focus on specific aspects of the data, such as Black and minoritized ethnic participants' experiences (Gangoli et al, 2019), those who had experienced spiritual/religious abuse (Aghtaie et al, 2020), or those whose experiences were impacted by their housing status (Lilley-Walker and Hester, 2019).

For these topics, we were able to export the relevant case summaries, and were then able to focus on those levels of the ecological framework which were relevant to the specific issue being analysed. For those papers drawing upon the sample as a whole, the summaries allowed a focus on specifically relevant questions or levels of interaction, for example a paper presenting the perspectives of v-s about what justice means to them[v] (Williamson, Eisenstadt et al, forthcoming). In this case all of the responses to the questions about what justice means

were analysed from all participants. For other topics, where a sub-set of interviews were identified, analysis took place on the full transcripts so that additional detail could be identified relevant to the specific topic being investigated.

The Sample

We conducted interviews with 251 participants. Information about the sample is provided below. In relation to demographic characteristics, we were particularly interested in those characteristics which might result in participants experiencing inequalities as a result. As already alluded to, we recognise that these categories of positionality are not unproblematic.

Table 1 presents a breakdown of the sample according to different demographic characteristics, as well as dual characteristics. As can be seen, from the 13 participants who identified as LGBT, none identified as having a learning disability. Of the 115 participants who were under the age of 25 when they first experienced some form of abuse, seven identified as having some form of learning disability. Of the 17 men who took part in the research, 11 were under the age of 25 when at least one of their experiences of abuse took place.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics across the interview sample.

	Learning Disability (LD)	LGBT	GENDER/Male (Gender/M)	GENDER/FEMALE (Gender/F)	Mental Health Issues (MH)	Physical Disability (PhyD)	Black & Minority Ethnic (BME)	Under 25 at time of abuse (U25)
LD	13 (5%)	0	2	11	7	3	4	7
LGBT	0	13 (5%)	5	8	9	1	2	9
GENDER/M	2	5	17 (7%)	-	8	2	1	11

GENDER/F	11	8	-	234 (93%)	113	26	81	104
MH	7	9	8	113	122 (47%)	28	25	70
PhyD	3	1	2	26	28	29 (11%)	7	16
BME	4	2	1	81	25	7	83 (32%)	38
U25	7	9	11	104	70	16	38	115 (44%)

Table two shows data about participants' demographic characteristics alongside their experiences of different types of abuse. The figures given under the headings are the number of participants in each category. We then present the cross-tabulated figures between these two sets of data.

Table 2: Experiences of GBV (not mutually exclusive) cross-tabulated with demographic characteristics across the interview sample.

	Any type of Domestic Abuse (N=220)	Any type of Sexual Violence (N=109)	Honour based violence (45)	Experience of abuse as a child (112)
Age: Under 25 at the time of the first abuse (N=115)	89	58	25	54
Gender: Female (N=234)	213	104	45	89
Gender: Male (N=17)	6	4	0	4
LGBT (N=13)	9	7	1	6

BME (N=83)	78	22	38	25
Physical disability (N=29)	28	17	4	13
Mental health issues (N=122)	111	68	17	63

As well as ensuring that we recruited participants who had experiences of different forms of oppression, we were also able to identify cross-cutting and intersecting inequalities experienced by the participants. For example, where age, ethnicity, and type of abuse (threat of forced marriage) intersected to impact on the experience of help-seeking of a participant. However, identifying overlapping inequalities does not in itself explain how those intersections are experienced by an individual. This is something that we as a team recognise and which we are in the process of writing a paper about.

Key lessons

This project would not have been possible without the support and cooperation of the different agencies and organisations who assisted with recruitment. Being able to pay these organisations for their time was not only fair, it was also crucial for maintaining their engagement with what was a lengthy and complex project. Research cannot always be prioritised, especially when organisations are coping with budget cuts. Our approach of providing additional financial resource enabled us to ensure that our requests for contacts were expected, and did not disrupt the everyday working of the frontline staff. This was particularly relevant when accessing marginalised communities whose resources are often the first to be hit during cuts to funding.

We were also able to recruit from specific communities partly due to our own contacts with those groups, making the larger interviewing team a huge benefit, as well as by explaining

how we wanted to ensure we spoke to v-s whose voices might not ordinarily be heard due to the range of inequalities being experienced by these participants. In these cases, for example in relation to individuals experiencing learning disabilities, we could show the benefit of these particular voices being heard. We also made extensive efforts to ensure that our processes of recruitment and participation addressed the needs of these often marginalised groups (Bentheim, 2018).

As outlined at the start of this paper, we sought to use an intersectional approach to both the recruitment and analysis of the interview data. As the description here of the categories used to identify those characteristics where inequalities might be experienced, we, as many others, have approached recruitment through positionality rather than process. By that we mean that we sought to increase representation in our project of those groups whose characteristics might lead to experiences of inequalities as opposed to cases where individual participants explicitly recognised these inequalities. As such, whilst our sample resulted in inclusion of 83 Black and minoritized ethnic participants, 13 who identify as LGBT, and 115 aged under 25 at the time of the abuse they experienced, this tells us only about the possibility of these inequalities leading to discrimination and not how they might interact (Windsong, 2018).

By using an *intersectional ecological framework*, we hope that the different papers which will be published from this project will contribute to debates about what intersectional inequality is, how it functions, and how we might respond in better ways to address its impacts. Just as we attempted to embrace that within our coding and analysis, so too must it inform the daily practice of different professional groups. For it is not enough to collect information about someone's background characteristics if this information is not then used to inform agency responses, as well as practitioners' understanding of the barriers (and enablers) likely to affect them along the way.

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[i] Further information about the project as a whole can be found here: https://research-information.bris.ac.uk/en/projects/justice-inequality-and-gender-based-violence

[ii] We use this term aware that there are current discussions about the language used in relation to ethnic minority groups.

[iii] A copy of the interview questions is available alongside the data in UK Data Storage where the project is available: Hester et al, 2018. https://reshare.ukdataservice.ac.uk/853338/

[iv] One of the participants, with learning disabilities, took part in a group and then later disclosed abuse and requested a 1-1 interview too.

[v] A paper by Williamson, Eisenstadt et al, forthcoming, is based on data presented here: file:///C:/Users/ptew/AppData/Local/Packages/Microsoft.MicrosoftEdge_8wekyb3d8bbwe/TempState/Downloads/3_TK_Meanings_of_Justice%20(3).pdf